

THE LAST KEEPER

#Chapter 41: TAG OF WAR - Read THE LAST KEEPER Chapter 41: TAG OF WAR

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It was only natural for the other team to choose a member of the other team who was not the best in archery. If neither member could hit the bullseye, then the member whose arrow was closest to the bullseye wins. The teams could only wish that the other Team did not know their weakest member in archery. That was impossible, however, because they had been training together for more than three years. And they spent more than half the classes training together. The classes were merely there to separate them into lessons that required a few members at a time, like medicine study.

Overall, class E is the strongest, followed by class C, then class B, then class A, then class D. That, however, did not mean there was a weak class. The difference between them is small, and if one class failed to work hard, they could be overthrown easily by the other.

Both chosen archers raised their bows and drew at the same time, aiming at the circular targets with a red eye at the centre.

"Release!" Miss Lakiya announced, and they released at the same time. They must not have been the best in archery, but they both hit so close to the bullseye. Miss Lakiya moved closer to assess the distance, and from a distance it was unclear, but after a moment she announced that class A's archer won. Class A cheered before they decided in unison who to eliminate. It was one of the Tamelku twins. One was troublesome enough. Having to deal with two of them could be detrimental.

"Get into position!!" she pointed to the two marked lines drawn by a thick pen. "Any team that gets pushed past the barrier is disqualified."

The tag of war length does not depend on brute strength alone. It greatly depended on mental strength, too. Even a weak team could win if it could hold on long enough to make the strong team doubt itself. Even after Class B lost a member, with one Tamelku still on the team who was good at playing mind games, Class B ended up winning. It was a longer game that went on for five minutes before B won.

The next game was between C and D, and C won in less than a minute. Class C secured the win easily. Then it was D and E, and D lost to E. D, having lost both of their starting games, meant they were disqualified and could not get to play the rest of their teams. The next game between D and C was the most brutal, and it went on for too

long, so it was clear that they tied. But tag of war is tag of war, and there were no ties allowed. Class B, led by the Tamelku twins, was good at playing mind games, but Class C was stronger in brute strength, and mind games could only take you so far if you did not have the strength to accompany them. Even with one member down, Class C managed to pull through, securing a close win. Then it was class E again with class A. Class A hesitated to choose Sagiri. After all, one member in team 25 was from class, and after watching the boy in action, he warned his teammates not to underestimate him. He did not know what the boy had hidden under his sleeves. It's better to fight an enemy you know sometimes than to fight one you did not know. That must have been a mistake because they chose Asari, the class representative of Class E. He was a genius in studies and average in combat and weaponry. He sometimes missed and sometimes hit. However, taking a gamble was their downfall because he hit the bullseye this time, costing Class A a member. Class A, having lost their second, naturally earned a disqualification, so they won't get to play their remaining two games.

The tension in the arena rose a few octaves. The three classes had exchanged the first position over the years before class E finally sat in it permanently. There was a rumour that if anyone dared to slack off in Class E, then they would have to take it up with Kaka Asakana, the very king bami of the Galka Academy. They whispered that the boy whom Sagiri had taken their position had failed to improve, and Kaka beat him half to death or to death. No one actually knew what had really happened to the boy, but no one dared to anger the king again. Even so, the class E performance had improved after the boy disappeared, and no one had been able to beat them. They did not have a weak link, or they didn't. Now with Sagiri, other classes had finally found a weak link.

"With two classes eliminated, I have to rewrite the board. I thought each class could win only one game, so that we could have the second and third rounds. "Miss Lakiya swayed to the board to write the order of the next and final round. Or perhaps not the last, if things went another direction.

"Here is the new order of the game."

B-C

B-E

E-C

Everyone groaned loudly. The game between Class B and C had been intense to watch, and with the two teams evenly matched in strength, it was a hard game to watch.

"I will listen to the cadets this time," Miss Lakiya grinned, an idea popping in her head. She turned back to the board and wiped the first two orders clean before redoing them.

B-E

B-C

E-C

Team B and E had not gotten to play against each other, and the tension in the arena grew even louder. The two classes had the longest rivalry, which had grown sour and grown stronger through the years. It could even be called enmity. They stepped forward, and with the wicked grins shot at Sagiri by the Tamelku twins, he did not need to use his heightened senses to know they were going to choose him. He happened to be standing in the middle of Kiuga and Kaka. It was Kiuga who had dragged him there. Kaka had conveniently added the distance between them as if being in proximity with his weaker self was a taboo.

"Don't worry, Sagiri the blind," Kiuga called him by his new nickname for him. It varied from newbie to Sagiri the blind, but Sagiri did not care much about it. Kiuga maintained the silly grin on his face while he looked at the Tamelku twins. He seemed unbothered, but Sagiri knew the guy was as scheming as they come.

"If I lose, they will eliminate our strongest opponent," Sagiri said, knowing that if he failed to hit the bullseye, they would definitely eliminate Kaka Asakana.

"Not if we chose the worst member of their team, too. Besides, the class does not need Kaka to win. I'm the only person the team needs," he said, pulling him under his armpit. Kaka groaned in irritation but ignored Kiuga. He was too focused on giving class B a disgusted glare. He had always hated their way of playing, and he took every chance to crush them. Hearing that he could be eliminated put him on edge. He wanted this chance to crush them.

"We chose Sagiri, the ash-gray sash," one of the Tamelku said, looking Sagiri up and down. They had the same haircut. Shaved on the sides with two locks covering the remaining hair, which were coiled on the head, one on the front and the other at the back. It was the signature haircut for the Tamelku clan, but the two made it look creepy with the third braid that ran down the front, which split their face in two. It was a braid only twins could get. In the Tamelku clan, twins were considered bad luck, especially if they were firstborns, because then there was no clear firstborn. Yet they wore it with the bride, their curse braid.

Sagiri stepped forward, unintentionally looking towards the class C section where N'varu had an unreadable expression staring at him. He was mouthing something, and after Sagiri had worn the oru-shells for so long to block out sounds, he could read lips well. He was not wearing them, but he could still read his lips across the long distance.

"Remember," he said. Sagiri could not understand what he meant as he walked towards the archery spot with the class B chosen archer. He was the same height as Sagiri, but he was much, much more built than him. Sagiri chose the bow and arrow behind him. The weapon was heavy in his hand, and it felt foreign. He had never wielded a bow and

arrow before, and he did not know how to even draw and shoot. His hands caressed the backbone of the bow. His fingers curved letters behind it. It was a language he could not understand. He looked at the Class C section again, and N'varu nodded at him in reassurance and mouthed 'Remember He could not understand what the guy meant, so he ignored him.

He walked to the shooting platform with an artificial wall behind it. Standing on the platform, the shooting targets looked even smaller halfway across the arena.

"Bows drawn!" Miss Lakiya announced, and Sagiri remained unmoving. He did not know how to wield the weapon, let alone draw a bow. He went through the archive, and he did not have any information on drawing bows. His hand brushed on the curved letters and tried to 'remember' if he had seen them before. Just like with the identity stone, something surged within him as if an untouched part of his mind was coming alive. All the hands that had ever curved the letter filled his mind in a rush, going back to the very first hands to wield a bow. The first unpolished moves of drawing bows. The bow and arrow were not just a weapon, they were history. All those hands crafting, creating, polishing, and handing it down as it became better and better. The very first hand to curve the letter on the tail of a bow. The word curved at the back of the bow was not a mere word.

'HISTORY'

The letters meant history, and he could agree more, many different ways and forms to draw a bow filled his mind, and his hands instinctively formed around its backbone, and one tightly around the arrow. He was deep in the history and barely heard Miss Lakiya say

"Release!"

It was as if some part of him was becoming one with the memory. Just like the first man to create the unpolished bow and arrow dance, his body moved back. One leg stepped on the wall behind him. His body merged with the man in his memory. Not the first man to wield it, but the first man to fall in love with it. They moved as one. They used the momentum to move forward, pulling the bow and positioning the arrow so far back on his chest in a non-polished move only he understood. They stopped the momentum, instantly sinking to one knee in a shooting position and simultaneously releasing the arrow.

There was a moment of silence as everyone in the arena watched the new move they had never seen. Even Miss Lakiya was at a loss for words. She had travelled far and wide and been in battle with many opponents, but witnessing such an unknown art happen in front of her eyes made her eyes grow wide with wonder and admiration. The arrow tore through the air furiously, together with the opponent's arrow. The opponent's arrow stopped at the target a millimeter before the bullseye, but the arrow released by Sagiri did not stop at the target. It pierced through the bull's eye of his target as if it were

made of paper. It shattered all the red, and yet it did not stop. It continued travelling to the other end of the arena, embedding itself in the wall. Only then did it stop.

There was a moment of silence in the arena as Sagiri finally came down from the memory. His body, however, had been pushed to its limit, and he had exhausted all his strength. Merging, remembering years of history, and becoming one with them had taken a toll on him. The bow fell from his hand, suddenly feeling heavier. Sending the arrow all the way across the arena. something he had never done before, because he merged with the past came at a price. One hand went to his chest, and another stilled him on the floor. He swayed as his chest twisted and he spat a mouthful of blood.

He could only sense amazement, curiosity, surprise, and pride from N'varu Neni and jealousy from Class B.

"Class E wins!!" Miss Lakiya announced after recovering from the shock. "It seems class B judged a book by its cover," he added, looking over at Sagiri again with amazement. Sagiri staggered when he tried to get to his feet, but N'varu caught him. He had somehow moved across the arena and was now standing beside him.

"You remembered," is all he said, helping him to walk to the class E section.

Chapter 42: Chapter 42: FAMILIAR

"Don't push yourself to do things if you can't handle it." That was the first thing Kaka said when he saw Sagiri.

"What he means is sit this one out, not to pull the team behind," Kiuga added, coming over to Sagiri. "This time you have to teach me that move, I'm not accepting any excuses, Sagiri the deaf," he said as the team moved to get into position. Sagiri sat down, trying to catch his breath, but all he wanted was to pass out and sleep. He had no strength to fight N'varu, so he sat leaning on him against him

"You can sleep, I won't let anything happen to you," N'varu said beside him, letting his sincere feeling leak. In this state, Sagiri could have slept in an enemy's territory and not cared for the consequences. So he let himself pass out.

The game between Class B and E did not take long. Their plan to eliminate kaka had gone terribly wrong, and the Tamelku twins looked at Sagiri with hateful eyes. With Kaka in the game with the strength of three men, they did not stand a chance.

"Class B disqualified!" Miss Lakiya announced. It was now down to the best two. The cream of the crop.

"Class E and Class C take to the platform!" Miss Lakiya announced. Even so, N'varu did not move.

"I forfeit my spot," N'varu announced, earning a few glares from his classmates. All this happened while Sagiri was passed out. He was completely passed out on N'varu's shoulder.

When Sagiri opened his eyes, he was standing in a place he had never been to before. It was not dark like the last time, nor was he in any excruciating pain. No strings were holding him down. It was as if he had walked into the complete opposite of the last time. The only thing that they had was the endless silence. He was standing in a place of endless white. No matter how much he walked, he remained in the same place. He could move, but it was no different than the first time. He was going round in circles in an endless void of white.

He walked for a bit and realized it was futile. He sat down and refused to move. Just when he was sitting and had given up, he was swallowed and fell for a long time before he opened his eyes again. He had, however, been thrown into another white void. The only difference was that this one had a door. He walked towards the door, feeling disoriented. Just when he was about to open it, the door moved. He chased after the door, but the closer he got, the further it got. He got tired as time went by and slowed down. Then the void swallowed him again. He let himself go, and this time, when he woke up, he was back to reality.

When he opened his eyes again, he was lying on the floor. His eyes took in the area around him. He was in the combat arena where they had been playing tag of war. The arena was cold and empty now, and he shot up into a sitting position.

"You missed dagger practice with instructor Bekuro, but don't worry, I made sure he did not attend it too." A voice said from a distance behind him. He turned around quickly. N'varu Neni was sitting in a meditative position on one of the raised platforms.

"What are you doing here?" Sagiri asked, stepping back. He did not even have the strength to defend himself. After the display with the arrow and bow, the power inside him was silent.

"You are the one who passed out on my shoulders." N'varu Neni said in a flat voice. Sagiri stepped back when N'varu jumped down from the platform and walked towards him.

"What do you mean you made sure Instructor Bekuro did not go to the training ground? Did you kill him?" Sagiri asked wearily. N'varu laughed for a whole minute, looking at Sagiri as if he had grown another head.

"You think I'm strong enough to kill a senior instructor of Galka War Academy? You are more dumb than I thought, keeper." N'varu answered.

"What did you do? And stop addressing me as keeper," Sagiri said, taking another step back as N'varu approached.

"Nothing. I just caused a diversion. or did you want to get punished with more hours without sleep?"

"It's none of your business!" Sagiri snapped. He still did not know what to do with N'varu. He did not know whether he was a foe or friend. The power inside him, powering the archive, had not called him an enemy, and it had never once lied to him before. Was it hesitation or cowardice on his part? He had been looking for evidence that he had ties to someone, yet when he made them all, what he wanted was to stay away from him.

"Whatever, kid. Keep lying to yourself. Your body passed out just like last time to use your life force to heal itself." He started, and Sagiri moved his muscles around, and truthfully, the soreness from earlier was gone, and the burning pain in his chest was gone too. "It, however, will kill you if you keep putting your body through too much strain, causing the one inside you to heal you."

"The one...?" Sagiri asked, feeling antsy.

"You can't run away from the truth keeper. At least let me help you so you don't turn into a puppet for him. He is neither good nor evil, but he might take advantage of you when you are weak and do things out of your control." How did he know all that? Sagiri wondered. The archive inside of him had taken advantage of his tiredness and absorbed a whole book, causing him to lose control late. "I see you have already experienced it."

"How do you know all that?" Sagiri asked, feeling even more on edge. He had lived his life waiting to find someone who knew the hidden part of him, and now that he had found him, he did not like it.

"Is it not clear to you yet, keeper? I only live my life to protect you, and if I fail, I am as good as dead." He said as if it were a promise, and he was willing to follow it to death. He then pulled the zipper in the middle of his chest, exposing his stomach. markings that his archive could not decipher were written across the chest. "Do you know what these are?" he asked, and Sagiri shook his head. He zipped his combat suit back on before he turned around to face the exit of the arena.

"You will come to know. It is almost time for supper. You should not miss it. Your body needs it." He finished his voice going cold, and he disappeared through the exit, leaving Sagiri with more questions than the first time. Now he had added another thing to his list of things to find out. He had to find out the meaning behind N'varu Neni's tattoo. For the first time, he had perceived an emotion from him apart from nostalgia. It was sadness and pain. He was hiding deep pain behind him, and Sagiri was weirdly very familiar with his sadness and pain.

He was still in a daze when he walked into the dining wing. He had barely made it through the door when Kiuga snatched him, forcing him to walk in line in front of him.

"I see that N'varu is finally done babysitting you." He started in Sagiri's ear. Sagiri was used to his lack of restraint, and he just went with the flow. The guy was bold enough to bother Kaka Asakana every day. He did not stand a chance. "He almost bit my finger off when I tried to check if you were dead with how unresponsive you looked. He did not even let Miss Lakiya move close to you. He was that protective of you the other time you fainted. He even stayed with you overnight, refusing to heed any instructor's commands to leave you to the healing team. He got punished in the suspension chamber for half a day for that."

He what?" Sagiri asked, taken aback at the new piece of information. Why could N'varu go through all that for him? That could not make sense if he wanted to kill him.

"He did not tell you? That N'varu is as tight-mouthed as they come. Did you guys know each other before coming to Galka War Academy?" Kiuga asked curiously. "The way he goes hard for you is the same way Kaka would die for me..." He barely finished before a blow landed on top of his head.

"Stop daydreaming." Kaka groaned. He had been walking in front of them the whole time. It was controlled, but it was a heavy blow. Kiuga, however, seemed to have received thousands of those, and he ignored it and started talking while he struggled to breathe.

"So Sagiri the blind, do you and N'varu know each other?" Sagiri could not understand why the guy mixed deaf and blind, but he let it go anyway. Sagiri thought about the question long and hard. He did not know N'varu before Galka, yet he always felt a sense of familiarity when he was close to him.

"We are familiar," Sagiri said, trying to find the word to put on the feeling.

"I knew it. That guy looked like a lion protecting his cubs from prey when i tried to check your pulse..."

"Next!" the server announced.

"Seven servings," Kiuga said, going to receive his food, but waited for him.

"Three servings." Sagiri said next but realized Kaka was standing beside Kiuga, "... and a half," he added the last part carefully, and Kaka muttered something under his breath. The guy was carrying twenty servings, and if he wasn't full, he could go back for more.

At the table, it was even worse because members from team 25 were gathered again. This time, even Zazarie and Bukata were in attendance. Even Kaka looked curious, and Sagiri could almost smell the question they wanted.

"Why did you not tell us you are good at archery?" It was Ulekai, and he held an accusing tone. He was the first to speak, and he was pouting.

"Because I am not," Sagiri said, and scoffs filled the table. "... I just saw my stepfather practice, and I picked it up, but I am not good at it." He finished, but with the destroyed bullseye and the mark on the wall of the arena where the arrow went in, begged to differ. He must have been too deep in the memory, the power inside him fueled the speed and accuracy of the arrow,"

"You know you do not have to hide how good you are?" Kiuga said. "It's been a while since someone bit me in archery," he bragged, and Kaka shot him a glare. He was clearly egging him on because Kaka was the best in weaponry. Mention any weapon, and he is good at it.

"Teach me," Zazarie said. It was the first time he had had him speak. The guy was big with an always disinterested look. He was among those who did not forfeit the game, but it was not personal.

"He can't." A voice joined the table. "Sagiri has suffered from an illness since he was young, which has reduced his stamina greatly. As you saw that day and today, whenever he uses too much strength or concentration, he collapses," he continued the lie without missing a beat. It was not completely a lie, however, but it was enough to convince the others. Besides, they had witnessed it twice, and there was no denying it.

"Why did you not say that too?" Kiuga asked as if Sagiri had betrayed him.

"I wanted a fresh start," Sagiri said in the Korun tongue, making sure he didn't sound perfect just yet. It was the first time he had spoken the Korun dialect and not the Tagayia language. What he said, however, was partly true. He did not want to live a life as the weird kid people avoided back in his village. He wanted a fresh start to be able to make a friend or two and even one day get to join in the festivities.

"What a waste of good skills on a weak body," Kaka said, standing on his feet. "Three and a half servings and your attempt at Korun are both shameful," Kaka said, voice full of irritation, before he walked away from the table.

Chapter 43: Chapter 43: DISCOVERY

The morning combat practice went the same as the day before. but with an additional lap. Sagiri was the last to finish, just like on the previous day. serving was done by the time he got to the dining wing. He was breathless, and it was a little disheartening to think that he would have to go another few hours without food. He turned around like the previous day to leave, but N'varu appeared beside him again.

"You can distrust me all you want, but you, of all people, need food," he started his tone flat as if he was talking to a child and they were not the same age. "Depending on him to heal you does not come without a price. Maybe you should look at yourself in the mirror," he said before leaving.

"I don't need you to get punished for my sake," Sagiri said when N'varu turned around to leave. He never demanded such a sacrifice. Whoever N'varu thought he was, he was not worth all the trouble.

"It is just a small price to pay compared to what they all lost," N'varu said. The same sadness and pain from leaking off of him when he experienced deep emotions hit Sagiri in the gut, leaving him breathless.

"Why can't you just talk to me directly about what you want to say. I can not understand the meaning behind your words," Sagiri asked. N'varu was as tight-lipped as Kiuga had said. Nothing had changed in his life to show that N'varu had aired what he saw in the healing wing.

"You already know everything. What can I tell you that you don't know?" N'varu answered, leaving Sagiri just as confused as before. Now that N'varu had mentioned his weight, he could finally look at himself more thoroughly. At first, he had thought that it was because of the intensive training schedule at Galka War Academy, and because he missed the majority of breakfast because he couldn't make it in time.

Maybe he had been turning a blind eye to what had been really happening to him. After he woke up the day he collapsed at the pillar and shadow arena, he had lost a lot of weight, but he did not think much of it. Let's say N'varu Neni is right, could the power inside of me be a separate entity on itself that feeds on me to survive like a parasite? he questioned himself. And what happens if I waste away, lose control over myself, and become a puppet? thinking about how the archive had absorbed a whole book while he passed out made him uneasy. He may have been the weakest student at Galka physically at the moment, but he, more than anything, hated being at the mercy of anything or anyone. that needed to change.

He moved towards the plate of servings N'varu left for him and gulped it down quickly. Time was running out for his thinning body and for the approaching assembly time. He was the last to arrive at the central Pentagon assembly area. He fixed himself in his frequent spot, at the back of the fourth-year line.

"Hey, newbie, are they bullying you? you look thin," someone said beside his ear. He turned around quickly. It was Daziko, the third year, and he was way out of line from the third year clear starting line. "You know, Galka War Academy, no matter how brutal in its ways of teaching, it punishes bullying severely," he continued.

"Cadets order!" an instructor said, suddenly forcing Daziko to jump back and get into a respectful stance. So N'varu had been right about him losing a lot of weight. He was feeling energetic with no side effects after consuming the breakfast n'varu served for him. It was not poison that was for sure. Unless it was a long-term working poison. He shook his head to rid himself of the thoughts. being paranoid was the worst place someone would be. careful was good, but there was a thin line between being careful

and being paranoid. The power within him had not marked him as an enemy, and it had never lied to him, so he let it go.

The drill at the assembly was as usual, except for Principal Zazami's speech when it was his time to address the cadets.

"Dear cadets, as you know, we just graduated our recruits to cadets. Our school, as of now, has 999 recruits who are on their journey to becoming the best assets for the state of Tagayia. For those in the final year, you know we have time to waste, and as you are the closest to joining the warrior's rank, we need to train you mentally and physically and prepare you for real-life situations after graduation. That sadly can not happen with just training in the inner Pentagon. That is why I have invited visitors to sharpen your skills in Combat in two weeks. Prepare yourself in all subjects so as not to embarrass me."

In two more weeks, Sagiri could have been able to finish all the school work from the first year to the third year that required reading. His combat skills were still very lacking, and the announcement had him calculating. The power inside him was using his body to fuel itself, and he needed to rectify that. He should have heeded Captain Salka's words from the start to eat more, not just the entity inside him, but even the physical. Even N'varu was right, he could not afford to lose any more weight.

After the weapon dance display, he wondered if it could be one of the requirements. He had not studied weaponry, which cut across all levels from the first year to the fourth year. The first and second years were just introductions and basics, and he had already understood a lot from weapon handling.

Sagiri sat in the third-year library when it was time for his compressed personal study lesson. He was eager to learn about weaponry. Learning about the bow and arrow had been an accident. He had tried on his own once to reenact the move, but he could not. The weaponry volume lay open in front of him. Thick pages. No decoration. Just diagrams and short blocks of text.

The Chapter began with distance. Weapons were divided by reach. Short, medium, long. The first Chapter was about the dagger. It is a whole unit by itself. He read about short weapons first. Daggers and concealed blades. They required closing in. No retreat once committed. The text marked targets without explanation: throat, spine, kidneys, inner thigh. The diagrams showed bodies collapsing, not bleeding. He had already learned about most of it practically from senior instructor Bekuro, who, for his special circumstance, had forgone the theoretical part and went directly to the

Sagiri paused. His hands rested flat on the table. He was more curious about the swords and spears, and so he skipped the pages and jumped to the Medium weapons section. Swords and short spears. Control over space. The book emphasized angles and positioning. Strength was irrelevant. A still blade could dominate if placed correctly. Most losses came from impatience.

He turned the pages, wanting to learn as quickly as possible. Long weapons. Spears, polearms, bows. Meant for distance and formation. Alone, they failed. Supported, they decided battles. Terrain mattered more than skill. A long weapon without space behind it was already lost. The last section was brief before it opened into another topic called Transition.

It involved explanations on when to drop a weapon, when to shorten the distance, and when to fight barehanded. Reading did not interest him much after what he experienced with the bow and arrow. It was as if the experience had made him want to connect with history in such a deep way. The books now seemed shallow to him, and he found them vague and disappointing.

He reached for the next volume still on weaponry, but it sounded the same to him. Nothing was able to scratch his mind. What was explained in the books seemed like just one point of looking at the weapons, when they were more deep and complex. He opened the first page on bow and arrow, which is the first choice for long range. It was easy to use and fast. The founder of the bow and arrow was written to be the hunter wife of the first man to settle in Tagayia.

"Ridiculous!" He snapped, shaking his head and shutting the book with a thud.

"Silence in the library, recruit!" a supervising junior instructor said, his nose turned to the air. He apologized silently with the slight bow of his head. But it was absolutely unbelievable. He had thought that reading a lot and reading all the books to ever exist could maybe answer his questions about who he was, but after finding out how badly the books missed the points, he was gravely disappointed.

He was still gloomy when he walked to lunch. He lifted his finger to sign four servings. He sat alone at a corner, deeply lost in his thoughts. His gloomy thoughts were, however, distracted when the last to face he wanted to see slipped into the seat opposite him. They held the same unsettling grin they always held, but even that could not hide from him the vengeful feelings that reeked off of them. He could almost hear their desires screaming above their feelings. *'We hate you!'*

They were distracting his peaceful thoughts with their suffocating hate, and he wanted to move away. Their hate for everyone, and more so him in the moment, was thick that he could almost touch it. He had learned to ignore people's feelings until it was necessary to address him. They were neither his foes nor friends, so he kept eating eyes low.

'Enemy,' The power within him stirred. It had been a while since it reacted so violently to someone. It did not even react to Kaka, the hostile king Bami of Galka War Academy, yet it reacted to the two creepy lookalikes in front of him.

"Ash gray sash," they said at the same time, and it was unsettling to hear. "It seems you are enjoying your food too much to pay us any attention." One continued with a voice so

robotic it sounded rehearsed with no emotion behind it. That could have had anyone believing they did not mean any harm, but he could perceive their feelings toward him louder than their fake voices.

"The food at Galka War Academy is pleasant," he answered after chewing for a moment, wondering why they were sitting in front of him if they hated him that much.

"You have been in this academy for only two weeks, but you have soiled our plans," they said in unison, and if Sagiri was to get scared, he could have screamed at how creepy that was. He, however, had never been overwhelmed by any feelings since he was born. He understood feelings and felt them, but as a secondary reaction. "My brother does not like that," they spoke again, "No wonder the Tamelku clan hated twins. They were seriously uncanny.

"A coincidence." He answered, chewing on a vegetable. The marks under his skin changed patterns dormantly, and the power within him stirred. It wanted to protect him, or its vessel, according to what N'varu had said.

"We should avoid more coincidences then, ash gray, what do you think?" one of them spoke. Sagiri could not even tell them apart, even if he tried.

"I do not have power over that," Sagiri answered them, scooping another spoonful of food.

"Are you mocking us, Ash Gray?" the other asked, still grinning, their hateful feelings growing to immensurable lengths. The power within him stirred in response, and he hated that their hate kept growing. This time, accompanied by some excitement. excitement for revenge, as if they were going to torture him, and he just gave them an excuse. His line of thinking had now been ruined completely, and all he wanted to do was sit alone and think.

"I thought the Tamelku duo did not wish to become a trio?" a voice broke through the hostility. It was level and controlled, but it held a sharp edge to it.

"If it isn't mother duck," they returned the sarcasm, speaking as one.

Chapter 44: Chapter 44: HAND TO HAND

"I thought the Tamelku duo did not wish to become a trio?" a voice broke through the hostility. It was level and controlled, but it held a sharp edge to it.

"If it isn't the mother duck," They returned the sarcasm, speaking as one. Both of them stared at N'varu with irritation.

"Are you trying to steal my little blind or did you miss me, Tamelku and Tamelku?" It was Kiuga's voice sitting impossibly close, matching their humorous grin, only that he did not reek of revenge.

"We were just getting to know the new guy," one of the twins answered in a singsong voice. "We shall be leaving now, Ash gray. Don't forget," they said, standing in unison. It was a promise of revenge, a promise of pain. Sagiri continued chewing on his food. It could seem he had met a guy who wanted to protect him for a reason he did not know, and in the same beat, he had made two enemies who wanted to destroy him for a reason he did not know.

"What did left and right want from you, Sagiri the blind? You sure do easily make friends." Kiuga mocked, laughing as if the situation were humorous. It seemed he had a nickname for everyone.

"Friends?" Sagiri tasted that word on his tongue. He had never had a person he could call a friend besides his parents, yet that was not what the twins were.

"Stay away from them," N'varu said seriously in a flat tone, still watching the twins' backs as they walked away.

Just then another voice joined the group. It was Kayu Asari, the class president of 4E.

"I am to escort you to Principal Senraki's office," was all he said. What could the principal possibly want from him this time? "N'varu Neni, you are also to accompany us," he added. N'varu looked surprised for a moment, but he did question the arrangement. The walk to the central pentagon was silent, with Asari in the lead and Sagiri with N'varu walking behind him in silence.

Senraki was sitting in his chair as usual, going through a pile of papers, and discipline commander Torena was sitting across from him. He held a grim expression as if there had been a breach in his perfectly disciplined lot.

"Sagiri, my aged student, you are here," Zazami Senraki said, standing from behind his pile of papers.

"Cadets greet the principal!" Asari and N'varu saluted him, getting into the respect stance with legs apart and the right hand above the heart. Sagiri had never greeted Senraki before he joined the others quickly. Torena, who was starting to frown, nodded in approval. The man is addicted to order.

"You might be wondering why I called all of you here, but for this, I needed the class president and your friend to be involved." Zazami's voice turned grave when he came to a stand in front of Sagiri. Am I in trouble again? Sagiri wondered. Did the missed lesson with Bekuro and N'varu's diversion finally come to light? That was the only sane explanation. No one in the room, however, expected what followed.

"It has come to my attention that you are getting bullied," Senraki said, his voice turning grave. "As the principal of Galka War Academy, I know of the little rivalries going on between the cadets and recruits. They are healthy for growth, and I allow them. What I don't condone, however, is bullying. It breaks my heart that you did not feel safe enough to report this to the instructors or me, but an anonymous person has reported that you seem to be having a hard time." Senraki finished, still looking at him, Sagiri could feel that dangerous aura that he kept guarded expanding. So this is the reason for our summoning? Sagiri felt relieved and confused at the same time.

"I have not been bullied," Sagiri answered, and it was the truth. Ever since he stepped into Galka War Academy, he had faced hostility, yes, but he did half of his lessons alone in libraries across the Pentagons, and he had not experienced an actual beating or direct harassment from any student. The discipline in Galka War Academy, kept by the discipline division commander, Torena, was rigid, and no one seemed to want to waste his time getting punished instead of reading. The Tamelku twins hated him, but they had not directly done anything remotely called bullying to him. Yet.

"Class president and N'varu, I hear you are the closest to him. Is he being bullied?" Senraki turned to Asari and N'varu, ignoring his answer.

"As the class president, I shall always maintain honesty, grand marshal. I have not witnessed any bullying." Kayu answered honestly.

"I have not witnessed him getting bullied so far, grand marshal," N'varu answered after Asari, his voice steady. There was a reason he was class president. His sense of justice surpassed most people, and he upheld integrity with his good analysis of both sides in a conflict. "But if there has been, I ask to be punished for my incompetence, and I will report personally to the discipline division commander if it happens again.

"You three cadets do know the price of lying to the grand marshal, don't you?" Torena stood to his feet, coming to stand behind Principal Senraki. More so, a grand marshal.

"Yes, Commander!" the three answered at the same time, this time around.

"Sagiri, are you lying to me?" Senraki asked again, and this time his voice was the most serious and sharper than Sagiri had ever heard.

"I have not been bullied," Sagiri replied again. It is normal for those being bullied to deny the fact to avoid getting bullied even more, but he had not been bullied.

"Well then, you boys are free to go, but if I find out you lied, the three of you will all suffer the same fate," Senraki said in his voice, still taking the serious edge.

"Dismissed!" Torena said, and the three boys streamed out of Senraki's office. They walked in silence till they got to the fourth-year pentagon.

"You are not being bullied, are you? As the class president, I can punish you for lying." Asari turned around to scold Sagiri. He was taller than him but still skinny and dainty. He is from the west. His clan held the same features as Miss Lakiya, and besides being tall and skinny, they are strong and agile.

"We were not lying, but the tamelku twins don't seem to like him," N'varu answered for both of them. Asari nodded, satisfied with the answer. The after-lunch class had already started, and they did not have any.

The next lesson was not taught by Miss Lakiya. The hand-to-hand combat lesson was taught by senior instructor Lotaga. He had his gold sash with black edges tied around his neck like a small scarf, defying all the rules of discipline. He stood at the front of the group, explaining something.

"Today, we will pick off where we stopped. For the friendly competitions to come, as announced by Senraki, you will have to do your combat dances. We will polish those in this class. Now get into formation 10 by 25, Sagiri. You stand close to me. front line." Everyone sank into position immediately, forcing Sagiri to stand on the remaining spot at the front. Leave it to Lotaga to put a guy who has never done the hand-to-hand combat dance at the front.

The class formed a wide rectangle that was perfect. Sagiri was the last to get into formation. He copied Asari, who was standing beside him. The lines were arranged in height, meaning Kaka was at the back. The combat dance began in stillness. Everyone relaxed into a relaxed position with feet set narrow, Weight forward, Hands open at chest height, and face focused forward as if looking at an invisible enemy.

"First movement!" Lotaga announced getting into position to lead the dance while he gave instructions. Sagiri was sure.

"First movement: step forward, then follow it with a palm strike to the throat line, then immediately shift left, drive your elbow back into an imagined rib. No pause," he finished the demonstration. Sagiri was sure he was doing it for him.

"Repeat!" He instructed, and everyone followed the movements in shared movements. The archive had captured the sequence, but his body had not fully absorbed it. He looked like a bad limp ruining the perfect formation.

"Second sequence: drop in weight. Low sweep with the leg. Hands press down as if breaking the balance. Knee rises into the centerline. Step away."

"Third sequence: turn on the heel. Forearm cuts across the neck. The other hand pulls back, simulating a head control. Short twist. Release."

"Fourth sequence: fall to one knee. Roll across the shoulder. Rise facing a new direction. Palm strike. Elbow. Backfist. remember to control your movements and use your belly to exert force, not your chest or limbs."

"Final sequence: close distance. One hand checks the arm. The other strikes the jaw. Step past. Push away." The dance ended where it began. But Sagiri was far off the line, and he had pulled himself back in. Lotaga just made them repeat once after every sequence

"Repeat now from top to bottom!" Lotaga instructed

The combat dance began again. Feet set. Weight forward. Breath controlled. Step in. Palm to throat. Immediate shift. Elbow drives into the ribs. Short step past the target. Heel stamps down as if crushing a foot. Turn. Forearm cuts across the neck. The other hand hooks behind the head. Sharp twist. Release. Drop low. Leg sweeps outward. Hands press down, forcing the balance to break. Knee rises into the centerline. Elbow follows. Step back. Pivot on the heel. Backfist snaps to the temple. Palm checks the chest. Shoulder drives forward. Push away. Fall to one knee. Roll across the shoulder. Rise facing a new angle. Palm strike. Elbow. Hammer fist downward. Close distance. One hand traps the imaginary wrist. Twist. Pull. The elbow strikes the jaw. Knee drives up. Step through. Spin out. Low kick to the shin. Forearm crushes across the collarbone. Short head control. Break contact. Step in fast. Two strikes to the centerline. Elbow. Palm. Grab and turn. Push the body away.

"Again!" he said, going around to correct stances which were already perfect in Sagiri's eyes, except for him. He settled for moving slowly because he looked retarded trying to copy others. Even so, his stances were wrong and his attacks even worse. Why could Lotaga even make him train with the others?

"AGAIN!!!" That's all he kept saying after every complete sequence. The arena was filled with grunts and yells after every complete movement. After they repeated a dozen more times, Sagiri could at least keep up halfway, but he was still slow and kept being the last to finish.

"Recruit Sagiri! Give me 100 push-ups for being too slow!" Lotaga suddenly issued a different command, signaling for the others to continue.

"Yes, instructor!" he obliged, dropping to his hands.

"I need to improve. and quick." is all he could think about.

Chapter 45: Chapter 45: COMPLICATION I

The days that followed went pretty much the same. Without realizing it, Sagiri had fallen into a pattern of eating with N'varu at every meal. He could still not make it in time to the serving wing for breakfast, but he had improved greatly with one week left till the friendly

contest would take place. They walked together to and from the classes they shared, and he came to watch him train before it was time to sleep. They did not exchange in vain words among themselves, but they had finally come to a mutual understanding. It could not be called a friendship or a partnership yet, but they had somehow started becoming a duo. Just like kiuga and kaka, who were unmatched. Sagiri and N'varu were the same, but with a much deeper, unexplained, and unspoken bond between them.

Principal Senraki had withheld the information about which school would be sharpening their skills against, causing the tension among the boys to rise to an unimaginable level. Everyone was training harder than usual, and Sagiri was not left behind. He had asked instructor Lotaga to teach him the combat dance personally, who had agreed almost too quickly. After the friendly with the anonymous school, the boys will compete per class and individually, and many more competitions could follow. There was no time to waste, and Sagiri knew he had to work twice as hard. The only chance he heard was in the written exam, and he pushed himself more every time he was at the library. He had almost completed the first to third year compressed studies, and if things went according to his schedule, he could finish in the next three days. The information in the Galka War Academy books did not quite touch on anything that could give him a hint of who he was. The only lead he had was N'varu, who had refused to tell him anything, saying he was not ready yet if he could not remember. Eight months remaining till the great trial began, and he was slowly but surely starting to grow impatient.

"Do me, and you share a clan?" he had asked N'varu once as they ate dinner, and N'varu had denied it immediately.

"Sharing a clan with you is not an honour I can bear. Eat," he commanded. He had also been instructing him a lot, even advising him to always get time to meditate and calm his mind every day. But with the tedious schedule at Galka Academy, he could only squeeze in ten minutes after lunch, and after supper, before the gong went off. He also helped him train when he was off studying in the three lower pentagons.

It was after supper and after studying at the first year pentagon on the languages of Tagayia. The curriculum did not require anyone to know all over a hundred languages of Tagayia, but learning the four dialects of the north, east, west, and central planes, together with the Tagayia language, was necessary. Knowing to speak more than plus a persons tribes language was a plus. Sagiri was not, however, studying the languages to have a plus. He was curious to know the languages he could not yet speak, hoping one of them was his tribe's language, and maybe it could help him remember. He had covered a majority of languages, and only a dozen remained, and some that were not included in the language textbooks because some tribes had gone extinct along the way. Am I from the lost tribes? he had wondered a couple of times. After all, he did not have a clan name or a tribe name, and he was more bent towards that theory. The zorimba language of the west he absorbed into his archive does not help him remember anything about his origin, and he almost thought about going through N'varu's thoughts, but he decided against it. Their relationship had just grown out of the rocks, and doing

that could just break their trust. Besides, they were the same age, and whatever he knew could not be accurate.

He walked back and into the fourth year's combat arena, and Lotaga was already waiting. He could finally memorize all the moves and do them, but they looked like a badly cooked mixture, like a bad dance. They lacked power and accurate technique.

"Your stances make me want to weep!" Lotaga right off the bat after Sagiri started the hand combat dance. "Did you not even play childhood games?" he mocked, correcting his stance.

"I did hunt for small animals," Sagiri answered seriously, and Lotaga died laughing, clutching his stomach.

"Did you ever even catch one with this form?" he seized Sagiri up and down before dying of laughter again. The guy did not act like an instructor at all. He always surprised Sagiri with how he acted.

"Yes," sagiri answered honestly and lotaga almost toppled with another wave of laughter stronger than the last.

"Were they dead or just babies?" he cackled tears flowing from his eyes as if that was the funniest thing he had ever heard.

"If you are going to teach the boy behind my back, at least act your age," a voice broke through the arena right behind Sagiri, and Lotaga both went rigid. Sometimes, Captain Salka moved so stealthily that Sagiri could not perceive his presence till he was beside him. He doubted he would be able to defend himself anyway if the guy wanted to kill him. He was on a level of his own.

"Captain, what possibly gave you that idea. I am just having a chat with the boy." Lotaga laughed awkwardly, giving the worst excuse known to man. "Where did you come from?" he continued shamelessly.

"I have been watching you for this whole week." Captain Salka added, and Lotaga started to move away as if he was looking for an exit to run. "Do you two have no sixth sense to know another person shared an arena with you?" he looked at Lotaga with disappointment. like a father scolding a son. Their relationship reminded him of that of two people he already knew, as if he were seeing Kaka and Kiuga's future.

"If you run, I will kill you myself." Captain Salka did not miss Lotaga's movements, and he spoke as if he couldn't believe he even had to scold him in front of a student.

"Sagiri, I have heard you say you used to hunt?" Captain Salka turned his attention to Sagiri, ignoring Lotaga, who was now standing obediently.

"Yes, captain!" Sagiri had finally learned the proper etiquette to address him.

"You two follow me to the obstacle arena," he turned around, facing. "How can you teach the boy the combat dance without first teaching him even the basics of combat?" he said over his head to Lotaga, who was now acting like a good instructor, but the boyish grin on his face never left.

"Well, I did not think that could be a problem," he answered with fake sincerity, and Captain Salka huffed.

"You are a senior instructor who does not know that, how can you teach someone to swallow without teaching them to chew. I should demote you to a junior instructor and put you on office duty," he threatened, and fear flashed in Lotaga's eyes, finally. It seemed that being stuck behind a desk was his worst nightmare.

"It won't happen again, captain. I will die if u have to look at one page of a book. Have mercy," he begged as if he did not care for his dignity. He was ridiculous and unpredictable.

"At least show some dignity in front of the recruit," Captain Salka said as they turned a corner and went down a steep ramp. Lotaga pulled himself together and cleared his throat, acting the mature senior instructor, but the facade crumpled a second later.

"Sagiri will always respect me for the knowledge that has been bestowed on him. He will not look at me as shallowly as you do," he faked a pained tone, and Salka took a sharp breath, clearly fighting not to kill him.

"Shut up before I put you on pet poop duty." That shut Lotaga immediately. He even shivered slightly. So there is something he fears more than sitting behind a desk? Sagiri thought.

"What is pet poop duty?" Sagiri asked in a low tone, and Lotaga yelped before jumping on him, his palm covering his mouth as if he had spoken a taboo.

"Don't ever speak those three words," he spoke as if he were traumatized.

The rest of the walk to the obstacle arena was silent, with only the sound of boots clicking on the floors. Only Sagiri's boots. The other two were walking stealthily. It was a habit adapted during their night missions, which took advantage of the darkness and limited visibility. They use silence to add another advantage, so an enemy could not see or hear them coming until they were surrounded.

The obstacle arena was huge with several separate training areas. A dozen students were still going at it, including the Tamelku twins in one section as if they were competing to see who finished first. When Sagiri entered with Captain Salka and Senior Instructor Lotaga, the two turned to look, and even at the far distance, Sagiri could

immediately perceive their dislike for him. it was more than dislike. it was hate or loath. And it had grown a couple of notches.

"I want you to visualize the obstacles and bars in front of you as tree branches and forest undergrowth. Show me how you used to hunt," Salka said when they came to a stop in front of a section with all types of obstacles.

Sagiri stepped forward, taking in all the shapes and the uneven arrangement of the obstacles. from the Iron Trunks: Thick vertical bars fixed into the ground at uneven distances. Some are smooth, others rough with rivets. They stand close enough to force sideways movement, bending and slipping through rather than walking straight. to the Swing Weights: Heavy metal blocks hung from chains at different heights. Some swing wide and slow, others snap back fast. Their paths overlap, forcing timing, ducking, or rolling beneath them. Falling Platforms: Flat steel plates suspended just above the water. They tilt or drop when stepped on, giving only a brief moment before collapsing. low crawl frames: Rectangular frames set close to the ground with crossbars spaced unevenly. Students must crawl or slide under them without lifting their backs. Target Columns: Narrow pillars that rotate slowly. Marked with vital points. They appear briefly between obstacles, requiring throws while moving.

The bars became trunks in his mind. Tall. Close. The gaps between them were paths animals used, narrow and known. The hanging weights turned into low branches, heavy with leaves. The ropes were vines. The platforms were rocks slick with moss.

"I need a beast to hunt," he said, turning to Salka.

"Of course, a hunt will be useless without a prey," he added, an amused smile taking over his face. Sagiri always hunted his prey with closed eyes, after memorizing the woods back in his hometown. He might not have to close his eyes till he got used to the arrangement, but he needed a prey to focus on. Using eyes in the woods could only be distracting. He had never gone wrong using his hearing and sharp senses.

"You there. Come here." Salka beckoned a person, and Sagiri perceived the person's hateful feelings before he turned around to see him. *One of the Tamelku?*

"Would you mind becoming a prey?" Captain Salka asked, but it was not a question because no cadet says no to a captain's request. Especially when he is seven feet tall and built like a tank. The hate doubled, and Sagiri was sure to find the guy without even using his ears. The hate was so thick he could have perceived him from a mile away.

"Yes, sir!" He agreed in a polite voice that could have fooled anyone, but with Sagiri perceiving his feelings, that was the furthest in fact, the guy oozed the same hate directed at Captain Salka at the moment.

"Good. Pick a position. Sagiri, get ready!" Captain Salka's voice thundered, and the two boys got into position, one walking in between the obstacles and another taking position in an open stance on the outside.

"Begin!" Lotaga announced with too much excitement after a moment, and Captain Salka groaned. The instructor did not have any respect for him at all. In that moment, Sagiri could not decide who got on Captain Salka's nerves more, between Principal Senraki and Lotaga.

Chapter 46: Chapter 46: COMPLICATION II

"Begin!" Lotaga announced with too much excitement after a moment, and Captain Salka groaned. Lotaga did not have any respect for Salka at all. At that moment, Sagiri could not decide who got on Captain Salka's nerves more, between Principal Senraki and Lotaga.

Sagiri heard the command, but he didn't move. being asked to hunt like he used to do had made him feel peaceful. It was easy for him to imagine the obstacles in front of him as the woods back at home. He shut his eyes, letting the image merge with the obstacles in front of him, not leaving any of them any one unaltered and merged to his own image, which was now full of trees and undergrowth and the occasional branches to latch onto and the open spaces to pass through stealthily.

He crouched low like he used to, letting his hands feel the earth pushing his senses and feeling not just the obstacles in front of him but the whole arena and everyone's current position. After one of the Tamelku twins had been called over, the remaining boys had stopped what they were doing and moved closer to have a look. He could perceive the hate of the other twin as he watched the scene unfold. He shed them from his concentration, allowing all his senses and hearing to focus only on his prey. He was crouched behind an obstacle, but he could tell his feelings of excitement beneath the hate. He listened to his rapid heartbeat and calmed his own till it was slow and steady.

When he finally moved, it was like he used to. He always enjoyed the hunt. Catching a prey was easy for him, so he made sure to enjoy the stalking and surrounding. He might not have built enough core strength and stamina for the extensive training at Galka War Academy, but hunting in the woods alone was his turf. There was no tree he could not climb or a hole he did not know like the back of his hand.

In one move, he undid his sash. he climbed a short bar, which was now a small tree in his head. Before he could reach the top, however, he jumped to a taller bar next to it and did that till he got to the tallest bar on that side. he climbed to the top and perched on it with only his feet, posture slightly bent forward. He straightened after a moment of being on the high spot. He then jumped down, but instead of falling all the way, his fall was short. He had done that intentionally, letting his sash hang on both sides of the bar and holding onto it with both hands. He loved this part most. Whenever he used to hunt, the fake falls were his favorites. He enjoyed the pull of gravity and the brain's alarm for

a second before he cut it short. He used it to propel himself before he let go, and his body flew the short distance. Two iron trunks stood in front of him, and it looked like he was going to run into them. At the last second, however, he turned his shoulders and slid between them, his feet placing where roots would be. He could feel the excitement from his prey grow, anticipating contact, but Sagiri was not going to give him that just yet. An aware prey was the worst; it was better to wear it out mentally if you couldn't wear it out physically.

A swing weight cut across his path, almost making contact with him, but he dodged it at the last moment. In his mind, it was a low branch snapping back. He ducked under it, hand brushing past, never breaking stride. He ran up a steep obstacle that needed both his hands and feet to climb. The surface was smooth, and in his mind, it was a tree with no branches. They were the most troublesome but the best to hide from creatures like snakes while you watched your prey. He did not have the pleasure this time, however, because, unlike a tree, his hands could not go around it. He could only climb as fast as he could and only stop when he was at the top.

Up to this moment, he had been circling the prey, but of course, it looked like he was just climbing obstacles and swinging from them but Salka and Lotaga were veterans, and Lotaga was beside himself with admiration. He was from the west, and he had grown up hunting. It was easy for him to recognize a fellow hunter and, more so, one who enjoyed and loved the hunt. Even more so, a self-taught one from the east. The boy might not have realized what he was doing, but to Lotaga it was like watching his younger self back home in the woods. It explained halfway why the boy was good in sensory.

"Amazing, he moves like he was raised and bred deep in the west," he marveled, and Salka slapped the back of his head.

"I think he moves like the north," Salka said, slightly impressed. The boy had caught his eye since their assassination attack. The boy was still far from becoming a full-blown soldier, but he was full of unpolished talents and surprises. With his sensory abilities, if he polished his hunting skills and incorporated them into his fighting style, he would be lethal. He was almost tempted to consider taking him under his wing and teaching him, but scrapped the thought from his mind. His core strength was still lacking; he needed a few more months of training before he could even think of that.

He only stopped for a second at the top to catch his breath. He was fast but not the fittest. When he reached the edge, he jumped over with both hands stretched. He twisted his body in a perfect arc as he was evading a branch but reaching for another in the same beat, and landed onto a falling platform. It tilted immediately because of his weight. He shifted his weight, toes gripping inside his boots, pushed off before it dropped, landing low on the next beam gracefully. The boots were not good on the bars and obstacles. He had always hunted on his bare feet. He had to compromise, however, so he was even more careful.

"I could have never thought he was this good. How does he look so feeble with so much skill?" Lotaga said as if he hated being proven wrong and loved it at the same time.

"You speak as if you were not his size when you joined Galka War Academy." Captain Salka snickered.

"I was thirteen, and he is sixteen or at least almost sixteen according to his file." Lotaga defended himself.

"Isn't that the same thing? I looked like that when I was seven," Captain Salka said proudly.

"Well, you are not human, that's different," Lotaga said, looking up at the towering form of Captain Salka's towering height.

"Shut up," he snapped, losing interest in the chitchat and focusing back on the ideas unfolding in front of him.

Sagiri dropped to all four at the next obstacle and the flat on his belly. The crawl frame in front of him became tangled undergrowth. He went down without hesitation, chest close to the ground, moving forward on elbows and knees, silently. He did not break the pattern or let his tiredness get to him. A target column rotated ahead. He timed it and mounted it with his hands, then his feet. He let it spin with him to the other side, but before it did a full 360 turn, he dismounted and jumped onto a section of suspended chains. In his mind, they were vines. He swung his body using one leg and used the momentum to land on another. He lifted himself backward in a perfect arc and let his body weight be held up by the back of his knees. His eyes were still closed, and he loved the position because it made him feel like a bat and made him relax.

He had already made a circle around the enemy. It served many reasons, circle and enemy, and being in that position put him directly in the line of sight of his prey. It also gave him a perfect feel of the outlets he could use. Now the only thing that remained was for him to make contact. The twin had been rotating with him, although he still maintained the same spot.

The levels of aggressiveness, hate, and excitement had risen to another level. The tensions were high, and Sagiri was thinking of a way to catch his prey without making contact. He had never been in hand-to-hand combat with anyone from the fourth year, but he knew he was still not a match. He thought long and hard, and all the angles ended with the twin using too much force for having been used as a pawn for him to prey on. Salka had gone and picked the worst of the worst.

He was like an agitated cobra, and whatever strategy he came up with ended with him getting slammed to the ground. He had to attack him from a distance. His hand reached into his pocket, and he felt for the cold metal handle. He pushed himself off the vine in one move, and before he landed, he was already moving head-on towards his target.

He could feel the target feel excited. When he was close enough but far enough, he jumped over an obstacle with all the strength he could master and released his sash at him. The sash was a distraction. snakes always attack fast when they are agitation was at its highest level. In the same move, when his prey was obstructed by the sash, he pulled his dagger and released. He knew the sash was not enough to distract his prey, and his attack with the dagger wasn't going for the kill. It was to deceive Twin that that was his real motive, using his hate drive to believe it was a real attack before he moved towards the direction he could escape to run from the dagger and tapped his back.

His attack never reached, however, because he was still faster, evading all two attacks and a distraction. Sagiri had predicted this, and he chose this because of that. The counterattack could only land them in the shallow training pool.

"Stop!" Salka announced when the two boys landed in the shallow water. Sagiri might have calculated the damage, but the fall tackle was powerful, even with the pool, and he landed hard. He felt it in his head as it rattled with the force. Even after Salka announced they would stop as if predicting what sagiri already knew, the twin still kept him under water, one around the neck and another on his upper hand. He was grinning with a satisfied smile yet his hate had managed to grow and it was now in suffocating levels.

"You think you can use me as your prey and hunt me with closed eyes, ash gray?" it was as if he was trying to kill him. Sagiri was already used to holding his breath under water for a long while but after the rigorous display on the obstacles he needed to breathe. His senses heightened and the power inside of him stirred ready to crush the twin if it came to that. A part of him also wanted to punish the boy. He wanted to keep his power a secret but still not at the cost of his life still he did not want to use it to defend himself yet. It took too much strength and like N'varu said he was still not strong enough to handle it and he still did not know how to wield it. Even his meditation during the free time he squeezed in between classes had not helped him figure it out.

"Makea let go of the recruit! Now!" Salka bellowed another command and the twin moved back still with a creepy grin but lifted his hands up in surrender before saluting captain salka.

"Yes captain."

Sagiri rose from the water and gasped for breath.

Chapter 47: Chapter 47: PAIN

Breathe in through your nose and hold, but not too long to make you gasp when you finally breathe out," N'varu instructed, sitting in the meditative position in front of Sagiri. they had been using their one hour before bed to meditate.

"That is what I have been doing all along," Sagiri commented, but maintained his closed eyes, trying to sleep back into his meditative slumber.

"No, that is meditative slumber. I am talking about conscious slumber." N'varu explained in a level voice as usual. He sometimes acted as if he were older when he was only a few months older than Sagiri.

"Nothing has changed. It's a waste of my time," Sagiri huffed, totally not understanding why N'varu was so hellbent on having him.

"You are almost sixteen in a few days, you need to regulate your body and take control," N'varu explained as if it made sense. He did not understand the guy, but he was not his enemy. The power within him had even labeled the twins enemies, and he could only perceive anger from them. They were the opposite of N'varu.

"What will change when I turn sixteen?" he asked, his eyes shut. They were perched on a raised platform deep in the shadow colonnade arena.

"I can not tell you something which has not happened yet," N'varu answered, and Sagiri finally snapped his eyes open. He rarely felt impatient, but N'varu had a way of making him feel frustrated.

"You know I can go through your memories," Sagiri snapped.

"In your state, you can only get to read my frequent thoughts. and right now, they are those of disappointment. besides, you have to catch me first." N'varu remained unfazed, almost sinking deeper into meditation.

"You were begging me to read them a week ago," Sagiri said, remembering how N'varu had addressed me.

"That was before I realized you were still a child and could not remember even your ties," N'varu said, opening his eyes, which were all white with no blacks. He always did that when he was in a meditative state of consciousness.

"I am capable of going through memories." Sagiri stared at the boy beside him as he blinked once, his abyss Violet pupils replacing the all white.

"A civilian, yes, but do you think you can read Principal Senraki's memories with where you are at now. You can't even access yours, which is why we are still here," he said, the here as if it did not mean the shadow colonnade arena, as if the here was the situation and not the place.

"Just learning to be in conscious slumber will help me remember then?" Sagiri asked, his voice full of determination.

"That is all up to you. Now follow my instructions," N'varu said with finality, the abyss violet disappearing. white took over, and he sank back to his meditative consciousness.

"Its more than just meditation," he said. "You don't sink. You hover in your consciousness while still aware of your surroundings, as your eyes are open. Let all your senses be active yet controlled."

Sagiri straightened his back. N'varu corrected it with two fingers, pressing lightly between his shoulders.

"Comfort invites sleep," N'varu said. "We deny it. Your posture is still comfortable."sagiri listed carefully.

"Breathe shallow," N'varu continued. "Then breath deeps the slow, not enough to relax." Sagiri obeyed. His chest barely moved. He did not know how to breathe in all those patterns and still keep his six senses open while he closed his eyes. So he had to keep his eyes open and focus on nothing. Falling into a meditative state with eyes open was a task in itself.

"Now split your attention," N'varu said. "Half on your breath. Half of the room. Hear everything. Name nothing." Fabric shifting. His own pulse. Sagiri felt them all.

"When the body asks to drop," N'varu said quietly, "you refuse. When the mind asks to drift, you follow. When you start feeling bored, you make your mind stay alert." Sagiri's limbs grew heavy. He wanted to close his eyes and fall into meditative slumber, but he refused the urge. the opposing activities in his mind were not making it easy for him to concentrate. His six senses competed with his mind, and his mind competed with his thoughts. N'varu tapped his wrist once.

"Do not chase sleep. Let it reach for you and miss." The room dulled. Edges softened. Time stretched thin. Sagiri was still upright and still aware. But distant, suspended between waking and sleep, held there on purpose.

N'varu watched.

"Good," he said. N'varu's satisfaction did not last for long, however, because his concentration broke and he snapped out of his conscious slumber. He had not even achieved it. he merely blushed it before everything came crashing down.

"This is not working." Sagiri breathed, trying again twice, but he snapped out with even shorter intervals in between.

"You are trying to control the process when you should submit to it," N'varu said, letting his abyss violet take over.

"Let's stop there for today. It is time to sleep," N'varu said, allowing himself to yawn before he stood to his feet. He jumped down gracefully and stood back, still waiting for Sagiri.

Sagiri took the long way because he was not in a position to jump. The Tamelku half had done a number on him. If they had not manipulated the situation for them to land in the pool, then he could have ended with a broken back or several broken ribs.

"Why did you even have to go and play with Makea and Nakea?" N'varu said, watching him walk as if he were an old man who had progressed in years.

"I already told you it was Captain Salka," Sagiri said, feeling every inch of the pain of being body slammed.

"You could have said no," N'varu answered, not missing a beat. "You wanted to get even, didn't you?" N'varu asked, starting to walk when Sagiri finally stood beside him.

"Well, if he had backed down, that could have been seen as a sigh of weakness," Sagiri answered, almost regretting his words, but if he could go back in time, he could still have gone with the same decision.

"Then you could have at least baited your time," N'varu said, jumping down another fallen pillar while Sagiri went around it.

"They hate me. I don't have to put them in my thoughts," Sagiri answered, not wishing to fill his mind with ideas of plotting.

"Your refusal to back down only showed that you were rising to the occasion. Backing down to move forward in the future is not a show of weakness." N'varu scolded, and Sagiri wondered when he had acquired himself a mother.

"Well, it's already done, I can only look forward," Sagiri said, and silence followed till they walked out of the shadow colonnade.

Sleep did not provide any relief for Sagiri, and he was still sore when he woke up in the morning. During meditation, he pulled his hood even lower, covering his eyes more, and tried to fall into meditation slumber, but he failed and just resolved to his usual meditative slumber. The morning training went as usual, and he still finished last but not further behind. Without missing meals anymore and moving up a serving to avoid getting glares from King Bami, his stamina had improved.

After the training, he was not too spent, and the adrenaline had numbed the pain from Makea. He was in a good mood after not finishing far behind and not collapsing after training. Training was starting to get more fun, and he did not hate the idea of running around the arena much anymore. It was progress, and he was happy about moving forward a step.

He saluted the warden on the fourth year pentagon, and he was sure he could make it in time to serve himself food this time. He turned a corner and was running up a ramp. He was about to turn the last corner to get into the dining wing when the smell hit him. They must have hidden very well or moved faster than he could react because before he could brace himself, a force hit him hard, sending him tumbling down the ramp before he landed awkwardly on his shoulder and the back of his neck.

Before he could react again, something heavy again slammed into his chest, making the remaining air in his chest rush out, breaking a few ribs loudly. A hand lifted him and slammed him into the wall so forcefully his head spun. Darkness gathered in front of his eyes, and he danced at the gate of unconsciousness.

Fists landed heavily on every part of his body so fast he could not even capture a moment to defend using the power within him. A tooth fell from his bleeding mouth with a heavy kick to his head. The attack happened so fast and ended so fast when the one lifting him by the collar left him drop like a sack of potatoes. He retched a mouthful of blood and tried to breathe, but his body combusted into pain. He could not scream because his broken ribs pierced into his lungs.

"Is this how I die?"

He whispered to himself when a darkness slammed into him, pulling him into consciousness. It was his body's way of running from the pain, and he gave in, allowing himself to be swallowed.

Chapter 48: Chapter 48: PAIN II

What happened next could not even be referred to as waking up. Sagiri jumped awake as if he had been hanging between life and death, and he had picked a side. He did not end up in the dark place just like time. He tried to move his body, but everything was restrained. He had snapped to consciousness, but he had not pried his eyes open yet. He tried to open his eyes, but it was like trying to move a wall.

"Do not take off his clothes no matter what you do," he could hear N'varu's voice above all voices, and relief flooded his body. He did not know how long he had been passed out, but he knew that if he didn't wake up, two things were going to happen at the same time. They were going to punish N'varu again and take off his clothes anyway. He had been injured pretty badly, and he could tell from the crippling pain piercing and searing like a fire into his every bone, muscle, and melancholic cell.

how had he missed his attackers? He had been hit by their hate long before they attacked. Yet he had been too slow to evade their attack. They had enjoyed hurting him more than anything. He could feel their feelings of pleasure as they pummeled his body with punches and kicks and threw him around like a rag doll.

"We have to. It doesn't matter what skin condition he suffers from. I am a healer, and besides, since he has not infected anyone, it can't be infectious." A feminine voice explained. Healer Sayaku.

"No," N'varu said, and he could hear silence in the room. "Take him away, he is still under suspicion too." The feminine voice was soft, yet it held command. It was now or never. Sagiri did not want N'varu to be punished yet again because of him. He pushed past the pain, past every suffering with all he had. It was agony, but he did not have time to just lie around.

he gasped and sat up just as the junior male healers were starting to hold N'varu back.

"It was not him," he said in a scratching voice, and all eyes turned to him. "He is my friend," he said, and he meant it. After hearing how much N'varu was willing to risk to defend him, he was sure that was what a friend was supposed to be. He had never had a friend to ride and die with him before, but someone risking punishment to defend you was for sure the definition. Just like he had seen Kiuga defend Kaka.

"So who was it?" a voice said, and pairs of boots sounded before the three men entered. It was Captain Lotaga and Yavaga. The latter two were later standing behind Salka, who was wearing a grave expression. Sagiri had only seen him like that when they had been attacked by assassins. He could perceive what he was feeling, and he was finally beginning to understand what N'varu had said about how his skills could work on trained veterans like Senraki and Salka. Right now, it was as if Salka had shed all other feelings, and he was just a weapon.

"Salka, this is not an interrogation room. Let me treat the boy first. He is only able to wake up now because of the black pill, the healing pill, and three pain-numbing pills. I still have to arrange his broken shoulder and jaw, and six ribs." With the information, Salka emanated a dark aura that filled the room, suffocating Sagiri. After what Healer Sayaku said, Sagiri looked at himself. His right hand was twisted at a weird angle. His jaw was hanging weirdly, and he was surprised he had been able to speak to defend N'varu. His left eye was completely shut, and he could only open it to a slit and could not see with it.

"I will wait here then," Salka said with finality. "Can you relocate bones with closed eyes?" Salka asked, and even Sayaku must have realized the dangerous mood he was in because she just nodded.

"You can not take off his clothes," N'varu said, not backing down. Even with the medication serving different purposes in his system, he could still not move much, and he knew his ribs could not be relocated with his clothes on.

"Yavaga. Lotaga. step out!" Salka commanded, and even Lotaga did not question as he stepped out. "Veil your eyes," he said to Sayaku, and she disappeared into another room and came out with a thin sheet before she laid it skillfully over her eyes. In some

tribes, a man could not allow a woman to see them naked or even in a vulnerable position, so treating a patient of the opposite gender while still veiled was not unheard of. N'varu was still not satisfied, and he looked at Salka with weary eyes.

"Whatever is behind those clothes will not leave my mouth," Salka said as Sayaku moved closer to get to work. "I brought the boy north myself if I wanted to harm him, no one could have stopped me then, and if I want to harm him now, still no one can stop me. Stand still, cadet N'varu," he said, watching the boy. It looked as if N'varu wanted to attack him if he even saw what was behind Sagiri's skin. His statement was to keep the boy from doing something stupid.

What Salka had said was true to Sagiri's ears. If the man was his enemy, he did not stand a chance. With his agility, strength, experience, and whatever hidden art was of his tribe he had still not witnessed, he did not stand a chance at all against him. Besides, he still needed to make allies. Captain Salka might have been the strongest warrior in the entire Galka War Academy, but he had not tried to harm him. He could take a gamble and let Salka see what lay behind his clothes. He could then maybe earn an enemy or an ally. He needed a strong ally, and Salka fit his bracket. It was time to make a stupid gamble. Sagiri turned to N'varu and nodded.

After Sagiri's signal, N'varu stood down from whatever stupid idea he had conjured in his head to attack Salka. He had been overwhelmed, and that allowed Sagiri to perceive his intention. It was not malicious. It was aimed to protect at any cost. But even Sagiri could tell how stupid it was. Salka could just kill him in a blink, and it could have made the whole thing blow out of proportion. Sagiri still remembered the dangerous glint in Salka's eyes when he had asked if someone ever broke into Galka War Academy. As the commander of all forces, the Galka War Academy, and the surrounding region, it was clear that the man could not tolerate any internal or external threat aimed at the Galka War Academy. If N'varu attacked him because he wanted to protect Sagiri's secret, then Salka could have thought it a dangerous thing and eliminated them both.

Healer Sayaku walked as if she could see even without her sight. This was clearly not her first time. She worked without haste, yet still diligent and efficient. Salka watched everything like a hawk, yet his face remained stoic.

She began with the jaw. Her thumbs pressed along the mandible, tracing swelling, locating the misalignment. Sagiri's head was steadied between her forearms. She instructed him to loosen his tongue and exhale. On the breath, she applied controlled upward and inward pressure. Bone slid back into place with a dull click. The click was loud, and it echoed in the silent room. She immediately immobilized the jaw, wrapping a firm bandage beneath the chin and over the crown to prevent movement. The process did not take long, but it was performed meticulously.

She moved to the ribs next. Every breath in the room was held as she pulled the zipper between her fingers. His mask was lying caressingly around his neck. Apart from his step-parents and N'varu, no one had ever seen Sagiri naked. He had always stayed

covered ever since he could remember. He felt more naked than ever, and it took everything not to hold onto the zipper with his good hand and go back on his plan to gamble. The markings under his skin, like symbols which were circular patterns around his hands, his torso, his thighs, and legs, were dormant. They were between zinc and dark silver.

N'varu's eyes immediately zeroed in on the markings on Sagiri's body, and so did Salka. He had never seen anything like them before, and their arrangement seemed almost artificial. He did not know any tribe that bore the markings or tattoos of such organized precision all over the body. He could understand the ancient symbols that consisted of the markings. He still could not understand why the boy was hiding those, and he looked between N'varu and Sagiri, wondering why they could go to lengths to hide them. When they were not glowing or moving around under his skin, they were underwhelming.

"Is that supposed to be the skin disease?" Salka asked, sounding disappointed. No one answered him, however, and they resumed watching Sayaku's hands move skillfully as she felt for the broken ribs next. The reaction was not what Sagiri had expected, but it was enough for now. It could for sure change when Salka got to see the markings come alive and grow with life. At the moment, Sagiri was too weak, and even the power inside of him must have been reserving itself to save its vessel.

Six fractures on the two on the left and four on the left side. Her hands moved skillfully, hitting several acupoints, allowing Sagiri to breathe a little better before she moved her hands to start fixing the broken ribs. Her hands palpated each rib, confirming position and stability. One by one, she applied external pressure, guiding the displaced segments back into alignment against the chest wall. The acupuncture kept Sagiri's breathing shallow to avoid further displacement. Once aligned, she bound his torso tightly with layered compression wraps to restrict expansion and allow the ribs to knit.

Last was the left hand. Sagiri's top part of the uniform was now totally off, lying with the bed beddings. He watched with one eye, his swollen fingers stiffly. He had never been hurt in that manner, and watching his hand sitting in the weird twisted angle made him feel a certain way he had never felt before. He missed Rusha and how gently she always took care of him. He watched Healer Sayaku as she checked circulation, then traction, followed by a gentle pull along the length of the hand to separate the joint surfaces. With precise rotation and pressure, the fractured bones seated themselves. She set the hand in a neutral position and secured it in a rigid splint, wrapping from wrist to knuckles. If Sagiri were not under the numbing medication, he knew it could have been excruciating.

She checked him once more to see if his pulse was steady and his breathing was controlled, before she stepped back. Sagiri had seen Rusha perform this procedure on her patients, and he also understood the process.

"Don't move," she said, finally, sweat dripping from her face. The process was delicate and needed meticulous care, and with her eyes covered, she needed to concentrate even harder and use her sense of touch to feel for every bone in Sagiri's body. helped put back his uniform and pulled his mask up, all the while blinded, before she moved back and uncovered her eyes.

"Now, can you tell me how you got a broken jaw, six broken ribs, a broken hand, and a swollen eye?" Salka was back to his earlier mood, and Sagiri had never felt such intimidation. It was as if he had no choice but to answer the question honestly. He, however, had not decided the best course of action, and he had not even processed why they had attacked him as if they wanted to kill him.

"I fell down the ramp," he answered, ignoring all the warning signs in his head.

Chapter 49: Chapter 49: THE MERGE

"Now, can you tell me how you got a broken jaw, six broken ribs, a broken hand, and a swollen eye?" Salka was back to his earlier mood, and Sagiri had never felt such intimidation. It was as if he had no choice but to answer the question honestly. He, however, had not decided the best course of action, and he had not even processed why they had attacked him as if they wanted to kill him.

"I fell down the ramp," he answered, ignoring all the warning signs in his head. Silence followed, and neither side spoke for a long moment.

"From the roof?" Salka asked, and Sagiri evaded his gaze. Of course, he knew Captain Salka knew he was lying, but he had not yet decided what the course of action was.

"The boy needs to eat and rest. He has to rest for a day. You will question him tomorrow." Sayaku said, watching the conversation unfold. She was a healer, of course, she could tell he did not fall, but her job was to heal, not interrogate.

"Recruit Sagiri for lying to a commander, you will have to be punished. Think about your answer clearly before tomorrow, or I will make that 'fall' feel like a walk in the arena," Salka said in a low voice. His aura emanated danger. Sagiri did not dare watch him until his back was turned and he walked out the door.

"Why did you lie?" N'varu seethed as soon as Salka was out of sight. "It was the tamelku twins. wasn't it?" he continued, his anxious demeanor morphing into anger. "They need to be punished for what they have done. Why are you protecting them?" N'varu paced around the room. Sagiri could understand his line of thought, but he did not have evidence either. They had made sure to make sure he could not see their faces. If he had not the ability to perceive their hate, they had pretty much left no loose ends. Yet he had no intention of forgiving him. He did not specifically feel any rage or any urge to revenge. Something inside of him, a part of him so dark he had never touched, wanted to make them know pain. it did not want to make it fast, but it wanted

them to suffer. slow and long till they begged to die. He did not try to deny that part of him. He felt dangerously calm.

"I will go right now and tell the captain. I can't just stand by..." N'varu started turning to leave, but what Sagiri said next had him frozen.

"I want them to die," Sagiri spoke lowly, and N'varu stopped suddenly in his movements, turning swiftly to Sagiri as if he hadn't expected him to utter such words.

"What?" N'varu asked, completely taken aback.

"I do not protect them. I want them to die by my own hand." Sagiri could not even recognize his own voice. It was like the power inside of him held a very dark side, and he had for the first time merged with it. Only now did N'varu realize his pupils had gone black, and he was not completely in control. When the Scouts had come to his village when he was twelve, the power had lashed out on its own with just the need to protect its vessel, yet now Sagiri had allowed it to merge slightly. Ever since he woke up and looked at his mutilated body, a feeling of rotting had started inside of him. He had let it fester while he received treatment. With every click of his bones back into position, the rot had festered and become a disease.

"Keeper?" N'varu said, rushing to his side, but the power inside him was leaking, and it pushed him back a few feet, making him skid on the floor.

"Keeper, stop! you are losing control, and your body is too weak," N'varu said, getting up from his feet and pushing himself closer to the bed again, his footsteps slow as if he was being blown away by a typhoon, and it was taking him everything to hold on.

"Humans don't deserve kindness." His eyes went completely black. N'varu panicked in his weakness. Sagiri had given in to his deepest feelings of punishment. He did not have mere emotions like hate or revenge inside of him. What he felt was the need to punish and prune the hate that festered in the human race. That was scarier than revenge.

"If you use all the remaining energy that you need to heal your body, you will lose control." N'varu tried to pump sense into the boy, but he was walking on the edge of his madness to punish, and until he punished someone, he could keep going down and down his desire to punish until he was completely lost.

"They are a wrong which I must make right," he spoke more to himself than to N'varu. He had received medicine to help him recover quickly, but if he pushed it, things were not looking very good.

"Keeper, stop!" N'varu said, panicking fully, but it was futile. Sagiri had now levitated a few inches off the bed. The markings under his skin were glowing violently, and N'varu could see the glow even under the uniform.

'This is bad,' he thought. He needed to act and act fast before things went totally wrong.

He let himself sink into a sitting position and forced himself to fall into conscious slumber. It took him a few moments. It was hard trying to get into that vast concentration space with Sagiri losing control, but he had to. When he opened his eyes again, they had gone completely white. he used all the strength he had to break past the leaking force from Sagiri. It felt as if he was moving a boulder, but he ignored the pain. He only had one shot to put the boy to slumber, and he could not miss.

He did not give Sagiri time to react before he hit the vital spot where his neck and brain stem. Everything that followed happened simultaneously. He held onto the sagging boy who had now lost all consciousness and laid him carefully back down, not to tamper with the bandages.

"I don't know how long I'm going to be able to keep him under control," N'varu said to himself, falling to his feet after gasping for breath. that had taken almost all of his strength to pull off, and the boy had not yet reached his full potential. He felt weary and proud at the same time. He did not need to stay away from home for much longer. He shed a tear and wiped it away. Just this once, he was going to leave the decision about the tamelku twins entirely in Sagiri's hands.

When Sagiri opened his eyes again, the room was empty with only food beside his table. He was in so much pain that he could barely move. The pain medication had worn off, which was the major reason he had woken up. He groaned, trying to stand up from the bed, but he failed miserably.

A junior healer came by and helped him to the cleaning room before helping him eat and gave him another dose of the pain medication, dark pills, and healing pills. He passed out again, another side effect of the pain medication. The process kept repeating itself for the rest of the day and the whole night. N'varu had not come back again, and he did not have any recollection of when he had left. He only remembered the rotting in his heart getting so loud, and him agreeing about punishing the twins for the pain they had caused him. They had messed up with his schedule to finish reading the three lower years' books, and for that, he was not willing to let go. not even his benefactor had made him feel the cold urge to punish like this before.

he had not yet decided what to tell Salka when morning came, and he had a feeling that Salka's way of punishing was worse than that of Fuwuka and Torena. before he could worry again, he fell back to dreamless slumber. Only for a while, however, before he was pulled into a familiar dream with that familiar woman and a throne made of the earth. It was silent, and for the first time, he did not stay in the dream much longer. He woke up feeling uneasy, but was under the influence of the drugs.

Miss Sayaku had been right, however, about him needing a full day to recover. He had not fully recovered anyway, but whatever was in the healing medicine had worked magic on him. He could finally move by himself. The pain was still there, but it was no

longer searing and hot. The pain was uncomfortable but manageable. N'varu had finally arrived with his change of clothes after the morning meditation. After bathing, Sagiri changed, and he immediately felt better. Sayaku came again, and after veiling his eyes, he changed the wrappings, tying them much tighter this time so no bone could heal with a crooked shape.

N'varu helped him back to bed after he had eaten before he left but not before telling him about his episode of losing control. He also warned him not to let it happen again.

"Don't let your urge to punish overtake you. We were lucky this time. No one was around. Good luck doesn't happen twice," he warned before leaving to start his classes. He had only been allowed to visit because Sagiri had confirmed they were friends. until the culprits were found. No one was allowed to come near him. Sagiri was still high on the drugs, and he fell asleep soon after N'varu left.

When Sagiri woke up again, however, it was not silent, nor was he alone. The strong presence in the room was what had jolted him out of his deep slumber. He understood immediately why it had gotten too suffocating for him to breathe. His right eye swelling had gone down, but it was still significantly swollen. He was, however, to open it in a narrow slit together with his left to take in the three men who were looking at him as if he were a specimen.

Principal Senraki was standing in the middle of the room with Captain Salka and the discipline division commander, Torena. They were speaking with healer Sayaku in a serious voice, and when he finally opened his eyes, they all turned to look at him. Torena held his usual expression. Sagiri guessed he needed to be there because bullying was forbidden in the school, and since no one could believe he had fallen down a ramp, the only explanation was that he had been bullied. He had only been in Principal Senraki's office a few days back to answer bullying charges. He was in a hard spot, and he, for once, did not know which way to escape. Salka was seething silently, but Senraki was on a whole other level. Sagiri could not perceive his feelings, but his presence held a darkness that was almost tangible in the moment.

"He is awake. It is time to begin." Principal Senraki said in the most serious tone that Sagiri had ever heard come out of him. He looked scary, and his presence held an even darker aura than Captain Salka. It did not look good for him at all. A moment of silence followed like the silence before a storm and since sagiri could not get a read on the three men he could only wait for what awaited him to unfold.

Chapter 50: Chapter 50: HIS BEGINNING I

"Look at him go," one kid said, nudging another. They are in the training ground of the traditional school, where kids under the age of 12 go. It was time to go home, but the boy was still going at it with the dirt dummies, which were used for sword training.

"Look at him trying to train, he is so clumsy and emaciated I could break him with a finger," the other scoffed. The four bigger boys were ready to leave the school grounds before their eyes beheld their target.

"I mean, the high school entry exam is in six months, I hear he is twelve like us," another added as the boys changed their trajectory and started approaching the smaller boy.

"He looks six years old to me," another commented.

"He is not even a pureblood of our clan, does he think he is going to master the clan's secret art?" another kid snickered. "If he manages it, learn before I do, I will renounce my clan name." They all burst out laughing.

Their eyes were fixed on a young boy with unusual bronze hair. No, it was not his natural hair color. The kid had been rejected by his father, and when his mother, who saw it fit to get pregnant by a man from another clan, died, no one could take care of him. So, he was shipped back to his father's clan.

A child bore its father's clan name and the tribe's name, so no matter how much the father wanted to reject it, he could not. Therefore, he left it around the clan for anyone who saw fit to take care of it.

No one really even paid attention to the kid because it did not look like any of the clan members. It was so dainty, like a girl, and it was a boy. I mean, how did he even look like a sack of bones at twelve? The boy just ended up staying with his great-grandmother, who had progressed in age.

His father had a family before meeting the boy's mom, and he had only met the boy's mom when he went to war south of the west for war. Being a warrior general and still brimming with youth, he was a heart trope.

Rumour had it that the boy's mother fell head over heels for him, being their direction guide in the south. She was from the Anki clan of the Sotek tribe, and the terrain was tedious. She was a guide since in the West, even in the southwest west women and men are equal. That is when a love story began between the warrior general and the guide. She did not know that he had a wife up north west, and they had soon got married during the war. The war went on for three and a half years with the state of Safaya, which had wanted to claim tribes in the southwest of Tagayia.

He was born during the last winter of the war, in a tent that smelled of smoke and wet earth. His father was a general from the North, a man spoken of in ranks and victories. His mother was a guide from the southwest, hired to lead armies through unfamiliar land. She did not know the general had a family waiting for him beyond the mountains. The war folded them together in quiet moments between marches. By the time it ended, she carried his child.

When peace was declared, the general rode north with his banners and men. He left her with an infant and promises of his return. Their son was born bearing his father's clan name and his mother's tribe mark, though only one of those worlds would ever claim him. The general, however, never rode south again, even when messengers were sent north to tell him that the woman was seriously ill. It is a shame to grow up without a father. The mother had greatly dishonored her clan since the marriage had also been unknown to her clan. The general had not even sent dowry, dishonoring the woman further. A child belongs to the father clan and bearing a name of a different clan, the boy naturally did not belong in the Anki clan nor the Sotek tribe. He needed to be joined with his father's clan and learn the ways of his clan. He was a boy after all, and he could soon become a man, so he needed to bear all the qualities of the tribe name and the clan he bore. It was a prestigious clan after all, and it was everyone's wish that the boy go north.

The mother, however, was a prideful woman, and after the general failed to come back south to pick her up or fulfill his promise of marrying her, she refused to give in to the clan's requests to go north with the child to seek him. It led to her committing the greatest taboo. denying a boy of his birthright and disobeying her parents after bringing them dishonor. She was cast out to live with the shame of the clan. That is when she started to fall ill. She was a prideful woman, and having been reduced to nothing had been too much to bear. She died when the boy was five. Fever took her in three days. After that, the world thinned. He learned hunger early. His limbs shrank. His ribs showed. He survived by begging, trapping small animals, and sleeping where he could.

When word reached the North that a child existed, one carrying the general's blood and name, he was summoned, not welcomed. Sent for like some object. After all, a general of his rank could take as many wives as he wished, but letting a child who bore his name to keep living like a shamed one could have brought dishonor to his name. So, his being summoned north was not because his father wanted him, but because he wanted to save his honor.

His arrival was not welcomed at all. He was too young to defy a general and too feeble to fight his scouts. Even more, he wanted to survive. He had spent most of his life living like a sewer rat, but instead of that, making him give up, he had wanted to rise above and make those who had made him and his mother suffer, know pain. Among the northern tribe, he was small. Too thin. Too quiet. His accent marked him as foreign. The boys called him war-spawn, guide's mistake, southern filth. It didn't take him long to become an object to be beaten. They beat him for training alone. They beat him for falling. They beat him for trying again.

(Kero-filth) Is the name they gave him.

They spoke of his mother as if she were stupid for loving a man above her station. They said he was worse for believing effort could raise him. His father never looked at him long enough to recognize him. Orders were given through others. Food was provided,

but never warmth. The general's wealth did not reach the boy's hands, only the weight of his name reached his back.

It was his great-grandmother who took him in. Old, sharp-eyed, bent with years. She did not defend him with words. She gave him a corner to sleep in, a blade to practice with, and silence to grow inside. She was almost blind from age and could only help the boy so much. The boy did everything around the house.

Every day, he was insulted. Every day, he was beaten. Still, he trained. The boy must have carried with him the pride of his mother and resilience because no matter how much he was despised, he still sought to rise. He trained day and night because the military school was the only door he could see. Not for glory. Not for his father's approval. But because leaving meant surviving, and staying meant breaking. Even so, he was still weak, and no matter how hard he worked and trained, he was still weaker than his peers. He had been late to join the traditional school. He had to learn what others had learnt since they were old enough to walk when he joined it at eight. He only had four years to learn the art of war of his father's tribe and study all they had to know.

He was bullied openly, without shame.

"Hey, Kero, you can't swing a sword like that." The biggest kid came to stand before him, laughing at his sword-handling skills.

"I hear you say you want to get into a war academy with your skills, not even Cilsil medical school can take you in with how weak you are. I hear Cilsil is the only school where one does not need any physical traits to join."

"Maybe he can join Kafka Rift Academy, can take you in with how dainty you are," another laughed.

"He won't even stand a chance with the ladies in Kafka. Those ladies come second to the Galka War Academy. He is weaker than even our ladies who have no interest in the military," another laughed. They were not completely wrong, however. He had been born with a genius mind, however, which was the only saving grace for him. He was able to remember everything he was taught just once easily. His problem, however, came down to his weak bones, which had been caused by malnutrition.

"Do you think because you are smart, it can help you join a war academy?" the biggest snickered, slapping the wooden sword out of his hand, and then the beating began. He was not surprised, however, and did not cry nor call for help. He had gotten used to it.

They always trained together in the yard, but he was never given space. If he stood too close, he was shoved away. If he kept his distance, he was accused of arrogance. When he copied their forms, they laughed. When he failed, they struck him for wasting time meant for "real sons of the North."

Food was taken from him. Water spilled on purpose. His practice blade was snapped once and thrown into the mud. When he complained, he was told to be grateful he was allowed to stay at all.

They blamed him for things he did not do. Broken tools. Missing rations. A poor hunt. The punishment always found him, because he was the easiest to point at. At night, whispers followed him even into sleep. They said his blood was wrong. That his mother had weakened him. That the general's strength had skipped him on purpose.

What hurt most was that some of the boys were not stronger than him. They were simply more accepted. They stood in groups. He stood alone. Still, he rose before dawn. Still, he trained after bruises darkened. Still, he practiced footwork with broken ribs and learned to fall without sound. He learned when to stay silent, when to move, when to disappear.

They tried to break him into leaving, but instead, they taught him how cruelty moves, how fear smells, how violence begins before the first blow.

"I just want to train like everyone," he answered timidly, and that angered the boys even more. When he answered, it angered them, and every time he answered, it always called for a beating.

"You think just because you bear the name of the general and the name of our clan, you belong with us?" Loka, the biggest, asked, shoving him to the ground with so much force that he hit the ground with a thud.

"Teach him a lesson, I don't feel like touching filth today," he said with so much disgust before spitting on the ground. His minions smiled greedily and wickedly. That was all they needed before they landed on him with kicks and blows. Today was a bad day for him. He always managed to avoid them, and when he was lucky, they only pushed him around or called him names, but today it seems they wanted to teach him a lesson.

I need to get into a war academy. I need to get away.' It was all he could think about past the pain, as the blows landed on him like rain.

'I need to get away.'